

Thinking Geographically

What do you expect from this geography course? You may think that geography involves memorizing lists of countries and capitals or exports and imports. Perhaps you associate geography with photographic essays of exotic places in popular magazines. Contemporary geography is the scientific study of the location of people and activities across Earth, and the reasons for their distribution.

Geographers ask “where” things are and “why” they are there. Historians organize material by time, because they understand that action at one point in time can result from past actions and can affect future ones. Geographers organize material by place, because they understand that something happening at one place can result from something that happened elsewhere and can affect conditions at other places. Historians study the logical sequence of human activities in time, whereas geographers study the logical arrangement of human activities in space.

Like all sciences, the study of geography requires understanding some basic concepts. For example, the definition of geography in the first paragraph included the words *location* and *distribution*. We use these words commonly in daily speech, but geographers give them precise meanings. This first chapter introduces how human geographers think about the world.

Geographers observe that people are being pulled in opposite directions by two factors—*globalization* and *local diversity*. Modern communications and technology have fostered globalization, pulling people into greater cultural and economic interaction with others. At the same time, people are searching for more ways to express their unique cultural traditions and economic practices. Tensions between the simultaneous geographic trends of globalization and local diversity underlie many of the world’s problems that geographers study, such as political conflicts, economic uncertainty, and pollution of the environment.

KEY ISSUES

1. How do geographers describe where things are?
2. Why is each point on Earth unique?
3. Why are different places similar?

CASE STUDY

Big Mac Attack

If when driving across the vast expanses of the United States on an interstate highway you are hit by hunger pangs, you are unlikely to be thinking about geography. At the next interchange you scan the horizon for fast-food restaurant signs, again in vain. Now, very hungry, you are again disappointed at the second interchange. Finally, as you approach the third interchange, you spot a familiar image atop a very large pole—McDonald's "golden arches."

When you drive up the ramp from the highway to the local road, you are confronted with a choice of a half-dozen fast-food restaurants. Very annoyed, you wonder why none of these establishments were located at the two previous interchanges. Why cluster a half dozen at a single interchange instead of dispersing one or two at each interchange? Now you are asking questions about geography. Geographers ask where things are located and why.

Geographers are interested in the location of McDonald's restaurants around the world, not just around a U.S. interstate exit. The spread of McDonald's from a single establishment in Des Plaines, Illinois, in 1955, to 32,000 establishments worldwide reflects what for many human geographers was the defining trend of the late twentieth century—globalization of economy and culture.

Thinking geographically is one of the oldest human activities. Perhaps the first geographer was a prehistoric human who crossed a river or climbed a hill, observed what was on the other side, returned home to tell about it, and scratched the route in the dirt. Perhaps the second geographer was a friend or relative who followed the dirt map to reach the other side. The word *geography*, invented by the ancient Greek scholar Eratosthenes, is based on two Greek words. *Geo* means "Earth," and *graphy* means "to write."

Today, geographers are still trying to reach the other side, to understand more about the world in which we live. Geography is the study of where things are found on Earth's surface and the reasons for the location. Human geographers ask two simple questions: Where are people and activities found on Earth? Why are they found there?

Geography is divided broadly into two categories—*human* geography and *physical* geography—and within each category, slightly different "where" and "why" questions are addressed. Human geography is the study of where and why human activities are located where they are—for example, religions, businesses, and cities. Physical geography studies where and why natural forces occur as they do—for example, climates, landforms, and types of vegetation.

This book focuses on human geography, but it never forgets Earth's atmosphere, land, water, vegetation, and other living

Human geographers are interested in understanding the economic and cultural conditions that permitted, and even encouraged, companies such as McDonald's to spread around the world during that time. Especially significant for some human geographers is the prominent role played by American companies, from Coca-Cola and Ford to Microsoft and MTV, in the creation of a global economy and culture.

In the twenty-first century, human geographers also recognize that global forces have not eliminated local diversity in economic conditions and cultural preferences. McDonald's success has been built on many individual decisions concerning the local economy and culture. The company encourages local operators to tailor menu items to local tastes—such as Japan's Teriyaki McBurger (with sausage and teriyaki sauce) and Chile's McPalta (with avocado)—and it avoids countries where few people can afford its meals.

Human geography is an especially exciting subject in the twenty-first century because of the constant interplay between the common and the exotic, between global forces and local distinctiveness. Every McDonald's—every place on Earth—is in some way tied to a global economy and culture, yet at the same time reflects certain characteristics that are unlike anywhere else.

creatures. Because geographers are trained in both social and physical sciences, they are particularly well equipped to understand interactions between people and their environment, such as the devastation in the southern United States after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Physical geography concepts explain the process by which hurricanes, such as Katrina, form in the Atlantic Ocean during the late summer and autumn and gather strength over the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. When it passes over land, a hurricane can generate a powerful storm surge that floods low-lying areas.

It is here that physical and human geography intersect. Katrina caused massive damage, in part because it made landfall near heavily populated areas, including the cities of Biloxi and Gulfport, Mississippi; Mobile, Alabama; and New Orleans, Louisiana. In an effort to protect these low-lying cities from flooding, government agencies constructed a complex system of levees, dikes, seawalls, canals, and pumps. The experience of Katrina proved that humans are not able to control and tame all of the forces of nature.

Human geographers are especially concerned with the uneven impact of destruction. Hurricane Katrina's victims were primarily poor, African American, and older individuals. They lived in the lowest-lying areas, most vulnerable to flooding, and many lacked transportation, money, and information that would have enabled them to evacuate in advance of the storm. On the other hand, the

wealthy portions of New Orleans, such as tourist attractions like the French Quarter, were spared the worst because they were located on slightly higher ground (Figure 1–1). The slow and incompetent response to the destruction by local, state, and federal emergency teams was blamed by many analysts on the victims' lack of a voice in the politics, economy, and social life of New Orleans and other impacted communities.

Relationships such as these between humans and nature will be examined throughout this book. For example, in Chapter 2 we will see how humans are more likely to live in the areas of Earth where land is flat, water is abundant, and the climate is mild, and they avoid living in mountains, deserts, and areas with harsh climates. The final chapter of the book will explicitly tie human activities to the physical environment.

To introduce human geography, this book concentrates on two main features of human behavior—culture and economy. The first half of the book explains why the most important cultural features, such as major languages, religions, and ethnicities, are arranged as they are across Earth. The second half of the book looks at the locations of the most important economic activities, including agriculture, manufacturing, and services.

This first chapter introduces basic concepts that geographers employ to address their “where” and “why” questions. Many of these concepts are words commonly employed in English but given particular meaning by geographers. The first key issue in this chapter looks at geography’s most important tool—mapping. A map is a two-dimensional or flat-scale model of Earth’s surface, or a portion of it. Geography is immediately distinguished from other disciplines by its reliance on maps to display and analyze information.

The second and third sections of this chapter look at basic concepts geographers use to ask two principal “why” questions.

First, geographers want to know why each place on Earth is in some ways unique. For example, why do people living close to each other speak different languages and employ different methods of agriculture?

Geographers use two basic concepts to explain why every place is unique—place and region. To geographers, a **place** is a specific point on Earth distinguished by a particular characteristic. Every place occupies a unique location, or position, on Earth’s surface, and geographers have many ways to identify location. A **region** is an area of Earth distinguished by a distinctive combination of cultural and physical features. Human geographers are especially concerned with the cultural features of a group of people in a region—their body of beliefs and traditions, as well as their political and economic practices.

The third key issue in this chapter looks at geography’s other main “why” question. Geographers want to know why different places on Earth have similar features. For example, why do people living far apart from each other practice the same religion and earn a living in similar ways?

Three basic concepts—scale, space, and connections—help geographers explain why these similarities do not result from coincidence. **Scale** is the relationship between the portion of Earth being studied and Earth as a whole. Although geographers study every scale from the individual to the entire Earth, increasingly they are concerned with global-scale patterns and processes. **Space** refers to the physical gap or interval between two objects. Geographers observe that many objects are distributed across space in a regular manner, for discernable reasons. **Connections** are relationships among people and objects across the barrier of space. Geographers are concerned with the various means by which connections occur.

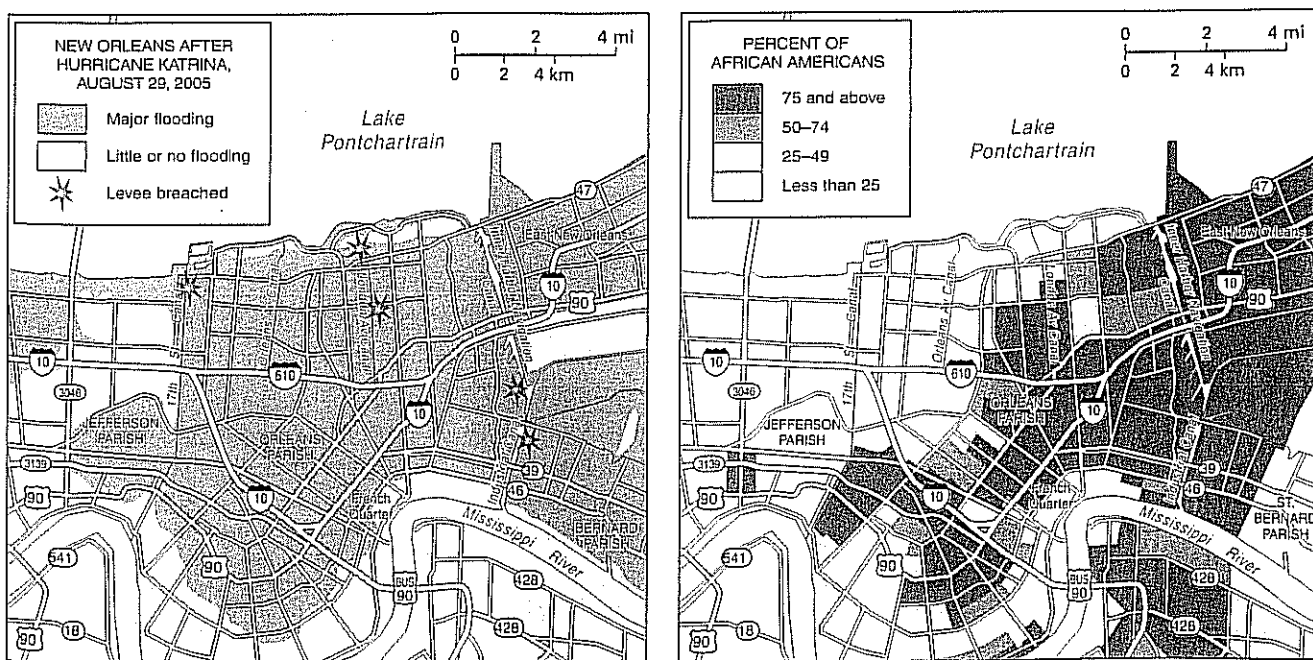
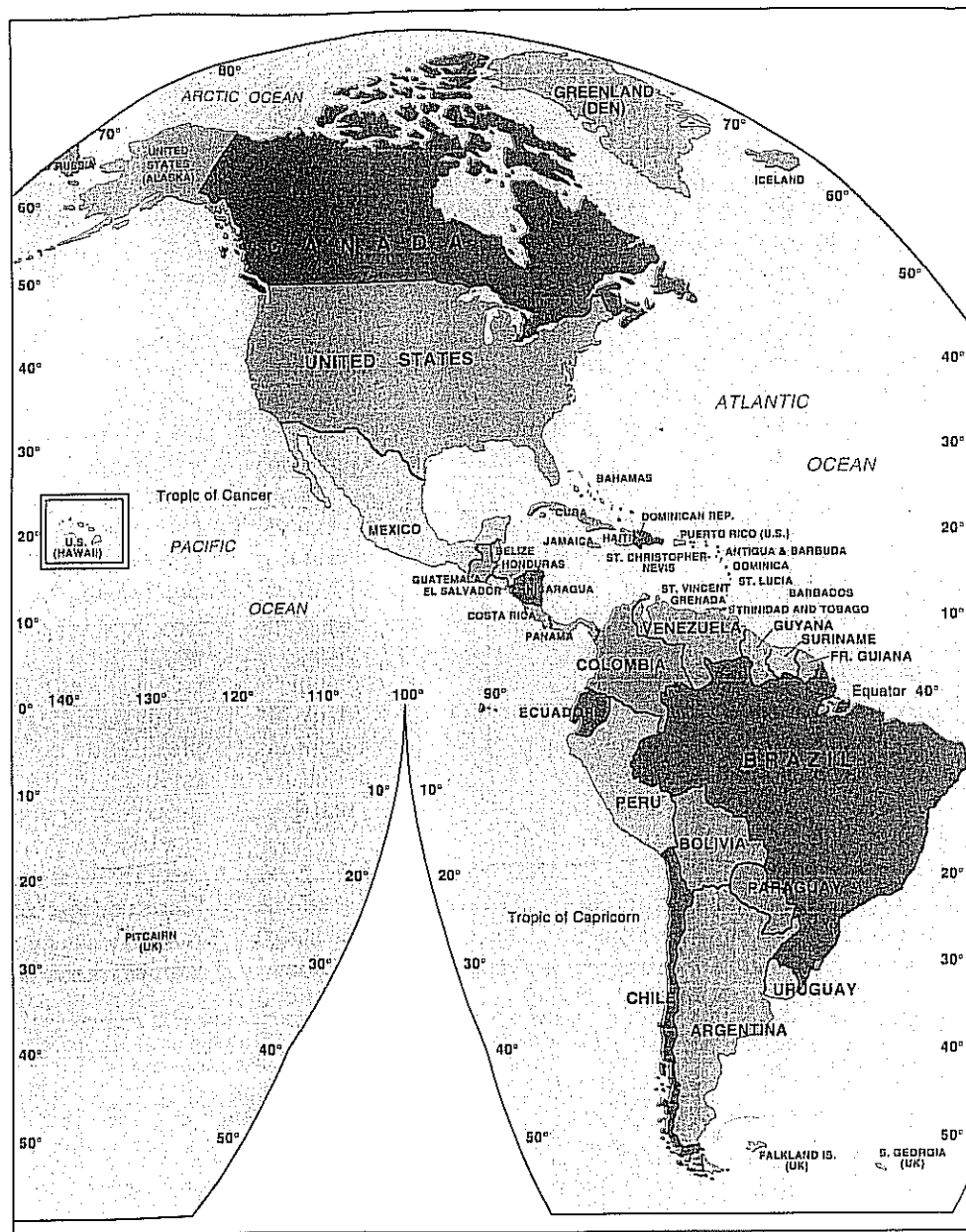


FIGURE 1–1 New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The discipline of geography sits at the intersection of physical science and social science. Hurricane Katrina illustrates this intersection. From a physical geography perspective, 80 percent of New Orleans was underwater after the city’s flood-protection levees broke (left). The 20 percent that was not flooded was the land at slightly higher elevations, including the leading tourist destinations in the Vieux Carré (French Quarter). From a social science perspective, at the time of the hurricane two-thirds of the population of New Orleans was African American (right). However, the population in the area that was not flooded was less than one-fourth African American.

FIGURE 1-2 World map. One of the most significant elements of the cultural landscape is the political boundaries that separate its nearly seven billion inhabitants. The numerous states range in size from Russia, which occupies one-sixth of the world's land area, to microstates such as Singapore, Malta, or Grenada. The names of these states evoke images of different environments, peoples, cultures, and levels of well-being. However, the political boundaries are only one of the many patterns that geographers observe across Earth's surface. Geographers study the distribution of a wide variety of cultural and environmental features—social customs, agricultural patterns, the use of resources—many of which transcend political boundaries. As scientists, geographers also try to explain why we can observe these patterns on the landscape.



KEY ISSUE 1

How Do Geographers Describe Where Things Are?

- Maps
- Contemporary tools

Geography's most important tool for thinking spatially about the distribution of features across Earth is a map. "[B]efore travel began a map existed first" (Zbigniew Herbert, "Home," in *Still Life with a Bridle*).

As you turn the pages of this book, the first thing you may notice is the large number of maps—more than 200. These maps range in size from tiny boxes covering part of a city (Figure 1-1) to two-page spreads of the entire world

(Figure 1-2). Some are highly detailed, with complex colors, lines, points, and shadings, whereas others seem highly generalized and unrealistic.

Like a model automobile or ship, a map is a scale model of the real world, made small enough to work with on a desk or computer. It can be a hasty here's-how-to-get-to-the-party sketch, an elaborate work of art, or a precise computer-generated product. For centuries, geographers have worked to perfect the science of mapmaking, called **cartography**. Contemporary cartographers are assisted by computers and satellite imagery.

To communicate geographic concepts effectively through maps, cartographers must design them properly and ensure that users know how to read them. A map, after all, differs from a photograph because it is a less literal representation of Earth, an artistic creation constrained by scientific principles. Cartographers must make two especially important decisions in creating a map—scale and projection.